

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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FM AMEMBASSY MONROVIA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4433

C O N F I D E N T I A L MONROVIA 0407

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, LI

SUBJECT: FINMIN TOLBERT REPORTEDLY TO RESIGN FOR HEALTH REASONS

REF: (A) MONROVIA A-97 OF NOVEMBER 4, 1974; (B) MONROVIA A-4 OF
JANUARY 23, 1975

SUMMARY: RUMOR HEARD FROM SEVERAL SOURCES SAYS FINANCE MINISTER
STEPHEN TOLBERT'S RESIGNATION WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN PRESIDENT'S
ANNUAL MESSAGE JANUARY 24. REPLACEMENT REPORTEDLY WOULD BE
PLANNING MINISTER NEAL. WE'RE SOMEWHAT SKEPTICAL, SINCE WE HEARD
SAME RUMOR, WITH SAME DETAILS, LAST YEAR. BUT PRESIDENT IS
NOTICEABLY NERVOUS NOW ABOUT WORSENER DOMESTIC SITUATION. PARTY
CHIEFTAINS, SO RUMOR GOES, HAVE TOLD HIM HE CAN BE RE-ELECTED BUT
WITH STRING ATTACHED THAT STEVE GO. IN ANY CASE, PRESIDENT WOULD
LIKE TO REDUCE COMPLAINTS AS COMING ELECTION CAMPAIGN OPENS.
SUPREME COURT CHIEF JUSTICE PEIRRE, STEVE'S FATHER-IN-LAW, MAY ALSO
BE GOING. END SUMMARY.

1. LOCAL SWISSAIR REP, WHO IS WELL PLUGGED INTO LOCAL POWER
STRUCTURE, YESTERDAY TOLD EMBASSY OFFICER FOLLOWING: FINANCE
MINISTER STEPHEN TOLBERT IS EN ROUTE TO US (OR DEPARTURE IS AT
LEAST IMMINENT) OSTENSIBLY FOR MEDICAL CHECKUP. STEVE WILL
SEND TELEGRAM TO PRESIDENT TO ARRIVE THURSDAY SAYING THAT
HEALTH WILL NOT PERMIT HIS CONTINUING IN OFFICE. PRESIDENT WILL
ANNOUNCE IN HIS ANNUAL MESSAGE FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, STEVE'S
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RESIGNATION AND REPLACEMENT BY MINISTER (OF PLANNING AND ECONOMIC

AFFAIRS) NEAL.

2. OTHER IMMINENT CHANGES REPORTED ALSO BY SWISSAIR REP INCLUDE RETIREMENT FOR AGE OF CHIEF JUSTICE PIERRE, PIERRE'S REPLACEMENT BY "JUDGE" MORGAN (WE ARE UNABLE TO IDENTIFY THIS MAN, PROBABLY REFERENCE IS TO MINISTER OF JUSTICE LAWRENCE MORGAN), AND NAMING OF FORMER MINISTER OF JUSTICE CLARENCE SIMPSON, JR., TO HEAD UP "FORESTRY DEPARTMENT" (PRESUMABLY NEW MINISTRY OF FORESTRY AND LANDS WE'VE HEARD RUMORS ABOUT-- MONROVIA A-97). SWISSAIR REP WAS NOT SURE THESE CHANGES WOULD BE ANNOUNCED IN PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE.

3. SWISSAIR REP DECLINED TO IDENTIFY HIS SOURCE BEYOND SAYING HE IS "IN THE PRESS" AND THAT THIS INFO WAS NOT PASSED ON AS A RUMOR, BUT AS "THINGS THAT WILL HAPPEN."

4. SUBSEQUENT TO RECEIPT OF FOREGOING INFORMATION, LEE DETWILER, AN AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN WITH LISCO, IN RESPONSE TO EMBASSY OFFICER'S QUERY ABOUT MATTER, ASSERTED VIEW THAT "STEVE WILL GO" (AND WAS WILLING TO BET ON IT AT 5 TO 1 ODDS). HIS UNDERSTANDING IS THAT PARTY CHIEFTAINS HAVE ASSURED PRESIDENT HE CAN BE RE-ELECTED, BUT THAT THERE ARE STRINGS ATTACHED. ONE OF THESE (OTHERS NOT SPECIFIED) IS DEPARTURE OF STEVE. ASKED WHY STEVE'S REMOVAL IS NECESSARY, SOURCE CITED TWO REASONS: PORTE AFFAIR AND LAST YEAR'S "ISRAELI BANKING FIASCO" (DETAILS OF WHICH NOT FULLY KNOWN TO EMBASSY), IN WHICH BOTH TOLBERTS AND GOL ALLEGEDLY LOST A LOT OF MONEY. AS TO STEVE'S WHEREABOUTS, SOURCE SAID THAT HE DOESN'T KNOW WHERE STEVE IS, BUT ADDED THAT HE USUALLY DOES KNOW.

5. SUBSTANTIALLY SAME INFO RE STEVE HAS NOW COME TO US THROUGH A MILITARY SOURCE.

6. COMMENTS

A. SOME SKEPTICISM RE FOREGOING ABOUT STEVE SEEMS JUSTIFIED. WE HEARD SAME REPORT LAST YEAR, WITH PRECISELY SAME DETAILS (HEALTH CHECKUP VISIT, TELEGRAM TO PRESIDENT, ANNOUNCEMENT OF STEVE'S RESIGNATION IN ANNUAL MESSAGE, REPLACEMENT BY NEAL, FROM "RELIABLE" PRESS SOURCE). ON OTHER HAND, REPORT IS FAR MORE WIDESPREAD NOW. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT STEVE HAS IN PAST CONFIDENTIAL

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YEAR BECOME A MUCH MORE SERIOUS BURDEN ON PRESIDENT TOLBERT'S IMAGE, MAINLY THROUGH PORTE AFFAIR AND ACTIVITIES IT HAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT. STEVE HAS REPEATEDLY SAID HE'D LIKE TO STEP DOWN. MOREOVER, PRESIDENT TOLBERT IS OBVIOUSLY MORE NERVOUS ABOUT DOMESTIC SITUATION NOW THAN HE WAS LAST YEAR (MONROVIA A-4). AND THERE IS ALWAYS FACT OF COMING ELECTION PERIOD, FOR WHICH EVEN IN LIBERIA, WITH ITS ONE-PARTY, SURE-WINNER SYSTEM, PRESIDENT WANTS TO REDUCE GROUNDS FOR COMPLAINT ABOUT HIS

STEWARDSHIP AND SHOW HE IS DEALING WITH THEM.

B. SO FAR AS RETIREMENT OF CHIEF JUSTICE PIERRE IS CONCERNED, IT DOES SEEM POSSIBLE THAT PRESIDENT MIGHT WANT TO SEE HIM GO. PIERRE IS CORDIALLY DISLIKED BY MANY OF THE ELITE, AND SOME OF HIS COLLEAGUES IN COURT ARE NOT ON SPEAKING TERMS WITH HIM. CITATION OF STUDENT EDITORS OF "REVELATION" FOR CONTEMPT IN PORTE CASE (MONROVIA A-4) WAS REPORTEDLY PIERRE'S DOING, NOT THAT OF COURT TO WHICH CONTEMPT WAS PURPORTEDLY SHOWN AND NOT THAT OF SUPREME COURT EN BANC. FACT THAT PIERRE IS STEVE'S FATHER-IN-LAW HAS CAUSED CERTAIN AMOUNT OF EYEBROW RAISING ABOUT THESE CITATIONS.

C. ONLY LAST WEEK, IN EARSHOT OF EMBASSY OFFICER, CLARENCE SIMPSON SAID THAT NEW MINISTRY OF FORESTRY AND LANDS HAD BEEN OFFERED HIM BUT THAT HE HAD TURNED IT DOWN. HE SAID HE'S BEEN FIFTEEN YEARS IN GOVERNMENT AND WAS GLAD TO BE OUT OF IT. THESE STATEMENTS EMBASSY TAKES WITH CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF SALT, HOWEVER; SIMPSON COULD BE EXPECTED TO BE PARTICULARLY EVASIVE IF HE KNEW PRESIDENT WOULD OR MIGHT ANNOUNCE THE NEW MINISTRY AND MINISTER IN HIS ANNUAL MESSAGE.
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